

# Survivor describes rail tanker blast that killed 2

By Maggie O'Brien and Alia Conley / World-Herald staff writers | Posted: Thursday, April 16, 2015 9:46 am

Immediately after the explosion that would claim his life, rail tanker cleaner Adrian LaPour shouted from inside the tanker for the ladder that was meant to take him to safety.

But the explosion at the southeast Omaha rail yard had blown the ladder roughly 200 feet away. LaPour's co-worker Dallas Foulk was also blown from the tanker.

Foulk was killed.

The only member of the three-man crew to walk away from the blast, Joe Coschka recounted on Thursday the harrowing scene that had unfolded before him two days earlier.

Coschka was on top of the rail tanker that LaPour and Foulk were cleaning. He said the harness he was wearing may have saved his life, since the explosion knocked him from the tanker as well.

"It was just a freak accident," he said.

Coschka said he blacked out for a few seconds after the blast.

When he came to, he could hear LaPour yelling from inside the tank.

"I think that...he was still with us for a few seconds after that ladder was ejected, and he knew that he wasn't going to be able to get out of there," Coschka said.

"That's something that will definitely stick with me for a long time," he said. "God knows if there was anything I could have done for them, I would have."



Joe Coschka, railcar explosion survivor

"It just lets you know how fragile life is ... I'm just blessed I had my angels with me, for sure," survivor Joe Coschka said after the blast that killed two co-workers.

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LaPour, 44, and Foulk, 40, were cleaning the tanker rail car near First and Hickory Streets when something ignited the explosion.

Omaha fire investigators have not released a cause.

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration is investigating the deaths and the company involved, Nebraska Railcar Cleaning Services.

A representative of Nebraska Railcar declined to comment Thursday, pending the OSHA investigation, and the company's attorney did not return a call seeking comment.

Autopsies were being done on both men. The results had not been released late Thursday.

Coschka said he suffered a few bruises and suspects his spine was fractured. He is scheduled to see an orthopedic doctor today and will also have a psychological exam for any evidence of post-traumatic stress disorder, said his attorney, James Martin Davis of Omaha.

At least for now, Coschka remains terrified. Being attached to the tank, wearing the harness, felt like "being trapped to a bomb," Davis said.

In an interview at Davis' office, Coschka outlined the events that occurred before and after the explosion. Fire and rescue crews were called to the scene about 1:10 p.m.

The three men had a quiet morning, Coschka said. They worked on cleaning the tanker car, and it seemed like business as usual, except for one thing: They had never before cleaned that chemical — petroleum distillates, a flammable substance created from crude oil. Typically the crew cleaned ethanol or oil from inside railcars.

Coschka recalls LaPour saying, "It's like walking on Mars, like Styrofoam. It's weird."

And the smell was strong, he said. The chemical smelled similar to natural gas.

Suit LaPour and Foulk, who were wearing protective suits and air masks, kept working. They used shovels to scrape the chemical from the floor and walls of the tank, loading it into a bucket that was hoisted up to Coschka, who was waiting on top of the tank to retrieve it and hand it down to another worker.

Coschka, LaPour and Foulk, who had grown close in the month Coschka had worked with them, went to lunch and had a smoke. Then it was back to work.

About 10 minutes in, Foulk started to come up the ladder, presumably to get some air, Coschka said. He was halfway out of the tanker hole when the explosion happened.

“All I heard was a hum, like a tornado behind me,” Coschka said. “The next thing I knew I was hanging on the side of the railcar.”

Coschka said nobody in the crew did anything wrong, nor did they cut corners.

“Everything was standard procedure,” he said. “That’s what scares me.”

Coschka also said none of the crew members were smoking in or around the tank, as some social media posts have alleged.

“I just want their families to know they died hardworking guys in a serious accident,” he said. “I’m the survivor. I’m the one who’s going to speak for them.”

Coschka on Thursday met with Davis, whom he contacted after worrying that he might need an attorney when dealing with any potential medical bills or workers' compensation issues. The father of four — his girlfriend, Megan Williams, is expecting his fifth child — said his children were top of his mind Tuesday after he realized he was OK.

“The first thought I had was that I didn’t kiss my daughter” that morning, he said. “And my baby on the way.

“It just lets you know how fragile life is ... I’m just blessed I had my angels with me, for sure.”

*World-Herald staff writer Vanessa Daves contributed to this report.*

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